

Beto O'Rourke, Praising Immigration, Kicks Off Presidential Campaign in El Paso

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Highlight: Mr. O'Rourke officially launched his campaign near the border with Mexico. His downtown rally came amid extraordinary discord over immigration.

Body

EL PASO — Beto O'Rourke officially kicked off his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination Saturday morning, quoting the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., raising populist themes and praising the way immigration has enriched El Paso and the nation.

Speaking at a downtown rally near the border with Mexico, Mr. O'Rourke said that his hometown, El Paso, its embrace of immigration and its rich ties with Mexico represented the best of the American experience, adding that the challenges facing the country presented “a moment of truth.”

Quoting Dr. King, he said El Paso and its Mexican neighbor of Ciudad Juárez were “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

He added, “This is a campaign for America, for everyone in America.”

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His words and the setting on the street that connects El Paso with Ciudad Juárez symbolized what his campaign said would be one of Mr. O'Rourke's themes — a “unifying vision for bridging divides” to unite Americans from all walks of life.

But the speech by Mr. O'Rourke, a former three-term member of Congress, comes at a time of extraordinary discord over immigration, with a surge of migrants trying to enter the United States and President Trump threatening to seal off the border next week.

El Paso has been a flash point for much of that unrest, with hundreds of migrants now being held in a makeshift encampment under a bridge near where Mr. O'Rourke was speaking.

The encampment, where immigration officials are detaining people behind razor wire with little hot food, was set up last week when El Paso's main border processing center reached overflow capacity following the largest influx of migrants in years.

Acknowledging the plight of the migrants, Mr. O'Rourke said, “Let us remember that every single one of us, including those who are just three or four blocks from here detained under the international bridge — behind chain-link fence and barbed wire — they are our fellow human beings and deserve to be treated like our fellow human beings.”

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Mr. O'Rourke, who also held rallies Saturday in Houston and outside the state's capitol in Austin, stressed not only immigration but also health care, education, climate change, criminal justice reform, the economy, voting rights and racial inequality. All are topics that have emerged as major issues in the effort by Democrats to unseat Mr. Trump in 2020.

[Check out our tracker of the 2020 Democratic candidate field.]

"This is our moment of truth and we cannot be found wanting," he told the enthusiastic crowd. "The challenges before us are the greatest of our lifetimes. An economy that works too well for too few and not at all for too many more. A health care system where millions are unable to see a doctor or be well enough to live to their full potential and the last, best hope of averting the catastrophe that will follow climate change, fading before our very inaction. We must overcome these challenges."

Mr. O'Rourke was introduced by his wife, Amy O'Rourke, an educator. The couple's three children also attended.

Mr. O'Rourke has been campaigning for two weeks, often in impromptu sessions in cafes or intimate town halls. But this was billed as his first major public event and opportunity to present the broad themes of his campaign.

Speaking extemporaneously for 34 minutes, gesticulating as he walked around a stage set in the middle of the street, Mr. O'Rourke hit particularly hard on access to health care and prescription drug costs.

"When one of the largest providers of mental health care services is a county jail system, and in a nation that is in the midst of a maternal mortality crisis — three times as deadly for women of color — let us ensure that universal health care means we can see a primary care provider, all of us can get mental health care, and that universal health care means that every woman makes her own decisions about her own body," he said.

He also called for better pay for teachers — "let's pay them what they're worth" — and a "world-class public school system from pre-K to 12."

The crowd of several thousand supporters included Marta Lopez, 71, a retired state worker from El Paso, who had come wearing a black-and-white BETO T-shirt.

"We've lived here all our lives, and I feel we don't need a wall," said Ms. Lopez, adding that she admires Mr. O'Rourke's positions on immigration as well as his pledge not to accept PAC money.

Several supporters of Mr. O'Rourke said they were intimidated by a gantlet of pro-Trump protesters blocking their way to the rally.

"They were just very confrontational and yelling scary stuff at us," said Thelma Ramos, 38, of El Paso, who came with her 13-year-old daughter.

Mr. O'Rourke, 46, grew up in this Texas border city, the son of a local political figure and a furniture store operator. He had little name recognition until last year, when he became a national figure during his unsuccessful effort to unseat Senator Ted Cruz, a Republican.

With a progressive sheen and grass-roots appeal, Mr. O'Rourke set fund-raising records in that Senate campaign. He continued that record-setting pace in the 24 hours after announcing his White House ambitions two weeks ago, raising more than \$6.1 million online in one day. That outpaced the \$5.9 million collected by Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont in his first day.

Some recent polls place Mr. O'Rourke third in popularity among Democrats expected to be in the race, behind former Vice President Joe Biden, who has not yet announced his intentions, and Mr. Sanders.

And if his style is entirely different from Mr. Sanders, he hit many similar themes.

"For too long in this country, the powerful have maintained their privilege at the expense of the powerless," he said. "They have used fears and division in the same way that our current president uses fear and division."

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PHOTO: Beto O'Rourke with his daughter, Molly, as he officially began his presidential campaign in El Paso.
(PHOTOGRAPH BY RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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